

## Attaining composure through breath-awareness: a phenomenological account of the use of the breath in social work

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# **Attaining Composure through Breath-Awareness: A Phenomenological Account of the Use of the Breath in Social Work**

## **Abstract**

This article is the first to address breathing in social work directly. It sits within the phenomenological tradition and as such provides accounts from social work education and practice as a means of recognizing a commonality of experience. The article argues for a considered, conscious use of the breath in order for the social worker to gain a state of calm or composure and also to be able to foster composure in others - the so called 'circle of breath'. The focus is on the skills of the worker but also on the meanings of the choices they make. A phenomenological approach to the topic of composure is contrasted with a psychotherapeutic approach. No particular method is advocated although several exercises designed to aid breath awareness are suggested. A discussion is threaded throughout on the relationship between the breath and spirituality in social work, also considered in phenomenological terms.

## **Key Words:**

Breath-Awareness, Composure, Phenomenology, Spirituality

## **Introduction**

Each year at the university where I work, I facilitate seminars for newly qualified social workers at which they are asked to speak about a situation they have found most emotionally challenging during their first six months in social work practice. The session is designed to create a safe space where social workers can be supported, mostly by their peers. At a recent seminar a social worker spoke about

going out on an emergency visit to the home of a mother experiencing mental health problems. The mother told her during the visit that she was hearing voices telling her to kill her children. The obvious question is how does one respond when such a comment is made? Not just what should be the practical or legal response in terms, for example of whether the children be removed etc. but even more immediately and fundamentally, how to physically and constitutionally respond when such a statement is heard? Or, put another way, how does one stay composed at that moment? Focusing in this article on the breath as an element of the social worker's presence and practice in this article will enable a fresh response to such challenging social work problems. It will be argued that there is a strong link between breath-awareness and composure for the social worker. As the phenomenologist Kleinberg-Levin writes:

“If we would learn *Gelassenheit* [calmness, composure], learn a way of being that is not a will to power, we must first give thought to breathing” (Kleinberg-Levin. 2018, p.10)

It should be noted that no previous article has looked directly at breathing amongst social workers. There have been recent studies on breathing and trauma (in particular van der Kolk, 2014) and as far back as the 1950s Gestalt therapists were writing about breathing and anxiety (Perls et al, 1951, p.128). The potential importance of mindfulness for the workplace has been recognized not least by the Mindfulness All Party Parliamentary Group (2015) and there have been numerous writings on mindfulness and social work (reviewed by Robinson, 2015) and on yoga, for example Mensinga (2011), in relation to social work education or practice. These articles, both in relation to mindfulness and to yoga, sometimes mention breathing but usually only in passing. Wong (2004) wrote powerfully about how she used yoga breathing exercises with social work students to get them to face themselves and their own identity issues and uncertainties, but she says nothing about the exercises themselves. Apart from that there has been nothing else that has focused on social work practice and the breath.

The academic discipline that has engaged most fully with the meaning and significance of breathing has been phenomenology. Examples of such writing (Kleinberg-Levin, 2018, and Lande, 2007) will be discussed below and more generally what it means to write within the phenomenological tradition and where

accounts of personal and professional experience fit within that. The article also argues that broader phenomenological philosophy, in particular that found in the later works of Merleau-Ponty (1964,1968), when he challenged both the dualism of body and spirit and of subject and object, aligns well with thinking about embodiment in social work practice. Phenomenology is not known as a discipline that dwells on the notions of spirituality but as long as the concept is understood broadly enough and especially in a physical or material sense (Author, 2017), there are important connections. Composure as a quality or virtue will then be explored, contrasting the ideas of Kleinberg-Levin with the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips. The possible negative connotations of individualized conceptions of composure for social workers are fully considered. The article will go on to explore, using accounts of social work practice and social work educational encounters, how a deep awareness of the breath can be applied to attain and retain composure especially in relations with other people – the so-called ‘circle of breath’. One section is focused on the act of inhalation or breathing in. As it is almost impossible to speak whilst inhaling, this part looks at not speaking in social work and the consequences and significances of not speaking as a choice. A later section focuses on exhalation or breathing out. Exhalation is normally how we use breath to speak and so this part will focus on the breath powering the voice. Both not speaking and speaking will be considered in terms not just of achieving composure in individual demeanor but also in terms of interpersonal communication. In addition the article will return to a brief spirituality and the breath in social work – also considered in phenomenological terms.

### **Breath-Awareness**

Leder (2018) in a discussion on yoga and breathing, notes:

“A first thing to notice about breath is the way we don’t usually notice it – it hovers on the edge, a kind of hinge between the conscious and unconscious realms. We take some fifteen thousand breaths a day but most of these spring up and die away without really entering our awareness” (Leder, 2018, p.220)

The claim of this article is that bringing more breath to conscious awareness, both the worker’s own breath and their sense of the breath of other people, has considerable potential to enhance social work practice. This is because an awareness of their own breath and of that of others powerfully connects the worker

to their sense of their own bodies. Cameron and McDermott's 2007 text *Social Work and the Body* introduced the important idea of the "body cognizant social worker". Unfortunately, even though Cameron and McDermott criticized Cartesian dualistic thinking in relation to the body (2007, p.24), their chosen term perpetuated the idea of a disembodied higher mind controlling a lower body. "Breath awareness" is a term that can avoid semantic discussions on the meaning of body and mind and as such the "breath-aware social worker" will hopefully better capture what can be gained by a conscious focus on the body. The notion of awareness of the breath is taken from the mindfulness literature (Kabat-Zinn, 2013) and is associated with a sense of non-judgmentalism towards one's own breathing. Kabat-Zinn is not aiming for a participant in his Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) groups to breathe in some special or correct way. It is more important that they are simply aware of their own breathing, no matter what it is like (see Appendix One, Exercise One). In similar fashion here – no particular breathing techniques are advocated although several from different traditions are discussed, but the how of breathing is not as important as the basic recognition of its importance for the sense of being, meaning and also an understanding of the spiritual self. One particular academic tradition is advocated, however, to help understand the meaning of the self in the breath and that is the phenomenological tradition.

### **The Phenomenological Tradition**

When Skof and Berendtsen (2018, eds) recently brought together key writings in the comparatively new field of the philosophy of breathing they presented the text- *Logos and Psyche: The Hermeneutics of Breathing* - written by the phenomenologist David Michael Kleinberg-Levin (originally in 1984 - revised 2018 text used below) as pivotal in the development of the philosophy. Other texts from so-called philosophers of breathing from that collection will also be discussed here (Gorska 2018, Elberfield 2018, Leder 2018) but it is Kleinberg-Levin's pre-eminent text and the ideas within it which has led the way and which will be explored in depth below.

Phenomenologists place a high value on so-called "lived experience" in the way they construct meaning. When Kleinberg-Levin wanted to consider the meaning of vision (Levin, 1988) he made himself undergo a so-called Dark Retreat where he lived in darkness for a number of days. More relevant to this study is the research of

Lande (2007) who spent time as a recruit in the US Army as a way to understand the formation of the US soldier. He looked at some of the key skills of the soldier such as shooting a rifle and calling out orders or cadence chants whilst running and, from his position as a fellow recruit, came to see how conscious breathing featured explicitly in the development of these skills and the formation of the body of the soldier. Following Lande this article will argue that while it may not be so immediately obvious that the skills of social work can be embodied in the same way as those of the soldier, they can certainly be seen in the same embodied sense. The accounts of the author's personal and professional experiences and those of students and other social workers they have worked alongside are also presented as similarly valid "lived experience" within that phenomenological tradition.

Another reason why phenomenological philosophy fits particularly well with a study of the breath can be found in the later writings of Merleau-Ponty (1964, 1968) in which he directly challenges Cartesian ideas of a split between the thinking self and the body. He pointed out that "I do not have a body, I am my body." (1968, p. 141) This refusal to separate the body from any other sense of self has been part of what has led contemporary discussions in phenomenology on embodiment and identity (Ferguson 2011, 2018). But as well as challenging the body /mind split Merleau-Ponty also challenged the subject/object split. He wrote "I see myself in the face of the other" (1964,) that is not a reflection of myself but truly myself. This leads to a sense of identity that is not internalized but relational with meaning created between and amongst people rather than within them. Lastly, implied in these works by Merleau Ponty (and later explicated by Kleinberg Levin – Levin, 1985) is a rejection of body/spirit dualism and a direct engagement with a sense of spirituality. Kleinberg Levin's is unusual in being a phenomenologist unafraid to discuss spirituality. Such ideas expressed in phenomenological terms provide an alternative to more traditional theoretical frameworks for social work such as psychosocial or psychotherapeutic approaches as will now be explored further in discussion of the key term in this article - composure

### **Composure**

Each year I introduce undergraduate social work students to the concept of virtue ethics (Clifford, 2016) by means of Socratic dialogue (Pullen-

Sanfaçon 2011). Students are encouraged to choose the single virtue that they consider is most important for the social work practitioner to possess. They debate until the group can agree the virtue they will accept as most important. Almost every year the dialogue comes down to a choice between courage and kindness. Interestingly, the virtue of calmness or composure as advocated here, is not one that is popular in these discussions. This is, perhaps, not surprising. The psychiatrist Adam Phillips in his essay "On Composure" (1993) argues that composure is "the least innocent of the virtues" (Phillips, 1993, p.40) and also that it is "after the fact, a paradoxical form of self-cure for the experience of traumatic excitement" (ibid, p.40). There is a sense that there is something false about composure, that it is a mask to put on to cover over the turmoil beneath. It is understandable that social work students, early in their studies and their thinking about their personal and professional identity are not drawn to the idea of putting on such a mask. Phillips comments further:

"The ego is appointed, in the Freudian story, somehow to diminish the trauma of the body... Composure becomes a pre-emptive strike – a kind of machine inside the ghost – against this disarray... In Freudian terms composure would be a form, largely unconscious, of vigilant self-control." (Phillips, 1993. P41-41)

In Freudian psychotherapy the self or ego is dominated by sexual drives and character is formed in response to them. Phillips provocatively writes about composure in these terms:

"The 'pervert' flirts with his composure; the 'hysteric' simulates its absence; the 'obsessional' parodies it;" (Phillips, 1993, p.41)

He then deliberately and provocatively misconstrues a statement from Victorian social commentator John Ruskin:

"To compose is to arrange unequal things" (Ruskin cited in Phillips, 1993, p.42)

Ruskin meant this in an aesthetic sense in terms of composition in art. Phillips misconstrues it so that composure is taken in another sense as a superficial response, to be calm in the face of inequality or injustice or despair. So then - how

can the social worker compose themselves in the face of injustice? Is that professionalism? If composure is just a Freudian defense mechanism, or a mask, then it may enable a social worker to get through their day but it is surely not genuine. It will allow them to stay professional in stressful situations which is important but there may be a sense in which this is not enough.

To challenge Phillips one has to step aside from the Freudian presuppositions that lie behind his thinking. This is difficult in a social work context because such presuppositions have been the bedrock of social work's thinking about the formation of the individual for several generations now (see Hollis, 1964 and Trevithick, 2011). It is possible to do this, however, using phenomenological theory.

Kleinberg-Levin, in his 1985 text *The Body's Recollection of Being* accepts the Freudian concept of the formation of the ego but fundamentally rejects the narrative of maturation as the suppression of sexual drives (Levin, 1985,) He argues that a mature individual can instead recollect and reconnect with their primordial self as it was before the impositions of the ego (for an extended discussion of this theorization see Author 2020). Kleinberg - Levin comments in the 2018 article:

“Breathing is our first teaching – a silent teaching – in the way of interdependency, continuity, relationship, giving and receiving. Our first teaching is one of perfect integration, harmony, non-duality. Breathing comes naturally; it is so rudimentary that it requires no action of volition, no attention or thought. But for that reason, the wisdom of breathing is the most difficult, and the very last to learned.” (Kleinberg- Levin, 2018, p.129)

The key phrase in understanding Kleinberg -Levin here is non-duality. He is arguing against a duality of mind and body or spirit and body and also against subject/object dualism. Meaning is found between people so this is not so much a spirituality of the self but rather a spirituality in the relationship.

The wisdom of breathing in social work can be learned through bringing attention and thought to the activity of the breath which is then natural and not imposed. But even if composure is not an imposition or a mask and it does emerge from true and natural breath surely it is still just a tool or an aid and of no use to others. But is it potentially something deeper and more powerful? Can a person's sense of themselves as composed be communicated to another person via their breathing to change a dynamic between them? In other words can the state of



composure have an effect on a relationship, can it bring about stability not just in the person but between people?

### **The Circle of Breath**

Elberfeld (2018), in a study of the use of the character “Ki” in Japanese which is associated with the English word “breath” but is used much more broadly, writes:

“In Japanese, it is said that ‘thin breathing’ means that someone is nervous, while ‘long breathing’ means the person is patient. ‘Large breathing’ means that someone is generous... if the breath of two people meets, these people will work together well as a team and when the breath turns well in a circle then the person is attentive to even the smallest fluctuations” (Elberfeld, 2018, p. 71-72)

Clearly, a social worker will want to be large and long breathed whenever possible but they will also want to be able to meet other people in their breathing and to turn breath in a circle. This is the nub of the matter. Breathing is not just individual<sup>1</sup>, it is a form of communication and engagement and potentially a particular form of engagement. This can be understood in spiritual terms as well as a spirituality of interaction. To repeat the quotation already used in the introduction:

“If we would learn *Gelassenheit* [calmness, composure], learn a way of being that is **not a will to power**, we must first give thought to breathing” (Kleinberg-Levin. 2018, p. 10 emphasis added)

The idea that calmness or composure is not at all neutral but can be a stance against authoritarianism or overweening ambition adds another dimension to this discussion. Normally one would expect such authoritarianism to be resisted by one speaking out against it – but that is not necessarily what is meant here as will now be explored.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was written before the arrival of COVID -19 where the communal aspects of breathing has emerged in a whole new light and are going to need to be considered. COVID 19 will undoubtedly change much but the positive comments made about the communality of breathing as an experience still stand.

## **Inhalation and Composure – not Speaking in Social Work**

It is a physiological fact that it is very difficult to speak whilst breathing in. Therefore, a focus first on inhalation means a look at what else is going on in an encounter besides speaking. Lande, in his study of the breath of the soldier writes:

“We better understand what is meant by military culture, and culture more generally when we foreground the backgrounded kinetic and sensorial structures of the body. In this way we are able to construct a more inclusive definition of culture that is sensitive to how practical competencies are acquired in and for action.” (Lande, 2007, p.?)

It is interesting to consider what might occur in social work education and practice if one was to foreground, for example, the kinetic and sensorial structures of the body involved in careful listening. It is actually possible to develop an attuned sense of what the body is doing internally and externally, how it is positioned and how it is engaging with others. This is known as proprioceptivity and the kinesthetic sense (Blackmor 1989). Proprioceptivity is the ability to feel one's own body. The kinesthetic sense is the ability to sense one's own movement. It is sometimes also known as the sixth sense or the third eye in yoga. It is particularly important in dance and Blackmor, (1989) and describes it as follows:

“Located in muscles, joints and tendons, the Kinesthetic Sense tells the ego from within what is happening -the shape of a movement, whether a foot is correctly pointed, a knee cap held taut, the spine stretched, the head balanced properly, the shoulders easy” (Blackmor, 1989, p,47)

One might ask - why does a social worker need to develop proprioceptivity or the kinesthetic sense? They are not a dancer or a soldier and they do not have a physical job in that sense so surely it does not matter so much if they slouch or hunch up a little. In response, I recall an encounter from early in my own early social work experience. It was a time when I should have spoken out but did not. I had undertaken a statutory home visit and was shouted at and sworn at on the doorstep. I failed to get the words out when I knew what I should have said - that I was visiting as part of my statutory obligation to check on the safety of a child. I felt my mouth to

be dry, my shoulders raised in tension and I recall a shortness of breath, a feeling close to panic, and retreating after having said nothing and then having to come back later, supported by others. I was very far from composed as my own body was telling me at the time but I wasn't listening to it. A heightened sixth sense will enable a social worker to work out where exactly stress and tension is being made manifest in their own body. It may be in the breath, but it is likely to be elsewhere as well.

Student social workers when asked to practice interview skills are actually often preoccupied with body language and one frequently asked question by student interviewers before they practice is "what should I do with my hands?" They often worry that their hands might be distracting or might reveal, in their tightness, the inner tensions the student feels as the interviewer (back again to the concept of a mask or of hiding their true feelings). My advice for the interviewer, especially when sitting, is "Put your hands, palms inwards, on your belly." This is specifically to enable the social work students to be in touch with their own breathing. It heightens self-awareness. Often, when we hear or experiences something dramatic, we go into flight or fight mode (Cannon, 1932) and our breathing will become erratic and shallow. It is good to know and be aware of this and the hands on the belly will enhance such awareness. The recommendation to put your hands on your belly follows the guidance of Jon Kabat-Zinn who in his book *Full Catastrophe Living* (2013) recommends an informal moment by moment mindfulness practice (see Appendix One – Exercise Two).

So far the discussion has focused on the social worker's sense of their breathing and their body to understand themselves and how they are in the moment. But is there the possibility of using themselves and their own breathing to develop a working relationship with others and to establish composure between people? On another occasion in my social work career, I managed not to speak when I knew I should not do so. I sat by a hospital bed, alongside a mother of a child whose epileptic seizures had become so severe and prolonged that his personality, his very self, was no longer in sight or reachable for her. I managed to stop myself saying – "It will be OK" or "I am sure he will get better" – and just listened to the sound of the child's breathing, and hers and mine, all of us breathing very shallowly. I made myself stay in that almost silence which felt so difficult to be in but also felt like the right thing to do. It is difficult to put into words how it could have been both those

things at the same time, but it was. There was possibly something of the quality of 'the circle of breath' about it. Was it a spiritual moment? Not at all. The most I felt was some fleeting sense of solidarity with the mother and then a realization and a kind of awe that she would still be sitting there with her son long after my short visit. Bassett, however in her recent PhD thesis on silence and spirituality focused in particular on the palliative care environment, describes encounters of much longer duration, sitting in near silence where the encounter does take on a more spiritual dimension.

To return to Kleinberg-Levin he argues that there is something about a deep awareness of the breath that is intrinsically spiritual:

"Breathing itself, and as such, is essentially a mode of prayer." (Kleinberg-Levin - citing Soren Kierkegaard, 1984, p.134)

It may appear strange to introduce the notion of prayer to a discussion of the breath but in fact there are many linguistic connections between breath and spirit, in Hebrew ruach, in Latin spiritus and in Sanskrit -prana. To mix together ideas of prana and prayer, or Hindu or Yogic and Christian language, may be challenged as inappropriate and as encouraging some kind of syncretistic religious sensibility. This is not my concern. My concern is to bring together a sense of reverence in the breath with an outward focus. One of the fundamental criticisms of mindfulness is that it is self-absorbed navel gazing which does no good (McDonagh, 2014) and a sense of spirituality which is phenomenological and therefore relational or mutual challenges that.

When people sit together and do not speak there is not silence because there is the sound of their breathing and there is the atmosphere created, in part, by their breathing. The novelist David Mitchell, in his book *Black Swan Green* writes: "When people listen they make a listening noise." (Mitchell, 2006, p.2) Such a noise is, I suggest, created by the quality of the breath. In a previous text (Author 2015) I encouraged social work students and social workers to find contemporary 'Gestures of Mutuality' that would enable them to communicate respect to the person with whom they are working. But the above discussion shows that at a deeper level possibly the social worker may just need to find a way to breathe with or alongside

the other person. This means using listening skills but listening not just for words but for their own breathing, the other person's breathing and the intermingling of the two.

Gorska (2018, p.248) notes that to break up the breath into two parts, the inhalation and exhalation, is a very western construct. In yoga the breath is broken into four parts with an air-full pause after inhalation and an air-empty pause after exhalation. Similarly, Leder writes:

“In the West, focused on action and purpose, we may view the breath as the constant movement of goods coming in and waste products going out. Efficiency, productivity, is key for the body factory. We thus model breathing as ceaseless activity. Yet we forget the moments of stillness from which the breath arises, and to which it returns as to its natural home.” (Leder, 2018, p.227)

But hopefully, this article, with its emphasis not only on the non-verbal but on caution about too hasty speech and action has managed not to model breathing as ceaseless activity. Neither is social work about ceaseless activity, and social workers do need to find moments of stillness, even if they are in the time between breathing in and breathing out, just to be rather than to act or speak. The emphasis in this part has been on finding composure before speech. The pause before the exhale can help with that. The composed person will be able to gather themselves before speaking, all the while aware of what else is going on around them.

### **Composure and Exhalation – the voice in social work**

Speech, as has been noted, is powered by the breath. It can also be fragile and easily impaired, for example, by stress or anxiety (Fisher and Kayes, 2018). As a teenager I went to a school in Wales where public recitation featured as a prominent part of the school year. Children in class and in the school assembly or Eisteddfod would be expected to recite poetry or prose. As I grew older, I realized that such recitations made me anxious and that anxiousness was made manifest in struggling to be able to control my breathing during a recitation. I would have no sense of when I could breathe, and so sometimes have no power in my speaking, in the middle of a line of poetry or prose. I would have to gulp. Then, knowing I might lose control/power of my breath made me more anxious and I would lose control even more. I was not ready or able to say the words. I was not composed. I avoided recitations whenever I could. Eventually the problem faded but even into adulthood

the memory of gulping, tension in the throat and sometimes having no power in my voice has stayed with me. Later, as a social worker, I retained the memory of my struggles with speaking and breathing.

There are, of course, different levels of confidence in speech and use of the voice. The social worker who succeeds in communicating effectively in a homely or intimate environment may still struggle in a more public or political forum. There is no denying, however, that this may well be a requirement of the social work role and this has long been the case (Attlee, 1920). In my own practice I came to appreciate the importance of being composed in speech, and that it was not necessarily the particular words I spoke which were important when trying, for example, to offer reassurance, so much as their timing, tone and timbre. And I found that warmth comes into the words often through the breath.

There are methods and approaches, however, that can be used to help the worker develop the abilities of their voice through the use of the breath.

Two of the appendices included in this article summarize exercises in developing breathing and articulation. One, the so-called Whispered Ah is a key approach used in the Alexander Technique (De Alcantara, 2009, pp. 144 -146 – see Appendices Two). The other, the so-called Bumblebee Hum, is a well-known Yoga practice (Swami Saradanada, 2016, pp 138-139 – see Appendices 3). They both emphasize the importance of the link between the body, the breath and the voice. They both make claims that their approach aids reaching composure. It is informative to note the similarities between them, even in the way they are written. But there are also key differences. F.M. Alexander had no time for what he considered the mysticism of yoga. Any reader who is persuaded by the importance of the body in the use of self and of the voice but remains unconvinced by any link to the spirit or spirituality would be well advised to peruse further Alexander's work as he was a sceptic in this regard (Alexander 1974). Alexander was concerned only with the physical, with what he could see in front of him and his intense focus on that and on the evidence of his eyes is his strength.

Yoga, by contrast, discusses what cannot always be seen. One key concept linked to breath in yoga is *prana*. Prana in yoga is not exactly the same as breath. Instead it is best thought of as energy aligned to breath (Swami Saradanada, 2016). Much of yogic practice is concerned with working on aligning energy between the inner and the outer or the person and the universe. However, yoga still retains the dualistic split between the inner and the outer or subject and object that Merleau-Ponty and Kleinberg-Levin were seeking to challenge.

There are also other writers apart from the yogic tradition who see the spiritual not only in the breath but in the use of the voice, emphasizing that to speak out is not necessarily to be any less spiritual than to be silent. Luce Irigaray, another of the contemporary philosophers of the breath, has written at length about breathing and spirituality. She notes:

“Becoming spiritual amounts to transforming our elemental vital breath into a more subtle breath at the service of loving, of speaking and hearing, of thinking. Too often we confuse cultivation and spirituality with the learning of words, of knowledge, of competences. We have forgotten that to be cultivated amounts to being able to breathe, not only in order to survive, but in order to constitute a reserve of breath as a soul that helps us to transform our natural life into a spiritual life.” (Irigaray, 2010, p.4)

So Irigaray includes speaking in this list of how through breath one becomes spiritual. Ultimately though, the definition of soul as “a reserve of breath” is probably more telling and probably fits more closely with the point made above that the ability not to speak, to hold back and leave space, as the essential skill.

## **Conclusion**

It is important to return to the question asked in the introduction and summarize the positions taken in the article to see if they offer potential guidance to a struggling social worker. So, once again, how does a social worker breathe when they hear a mother say they are hearing voices telling them to kill their own children? Or, put another way, how does “breath awareness” make a difference?

Firstly, the composed social worker will not speak immediately. This article has sought to understand ‘the wisdom of breathing’ and to focus principally on the silent nature of the teaching. Having stated in the introduction the aim of drawing on Lande’s 2007 article on breathing and the soldier by focusing on particular skills and activities, it may therefore seem odd that the principal focus was on something not done -that is on not speaking. But, as has been made clear, not speaking is itself a skill and in order for the social worker to become breath-aware they must not speak too suddenly or too often. In addition, not speaking is an active choice. In a situation in which a state actor is expected to step in and intervene, not doing so immediately can be an important decision. Not speaking enables them to focus on what else is going on, bodily speaking. They can feel their own breathing and know what that means about their own state of mind and they also try to tune in to the breathing of the other person and find meanings in it. Secondly, the breath aware social worker waits for their own sense of composedness to return before then articulating in their own true voice. The article offers several possible exercises to enable social workers to connect to their own breathing (see appendices). All make claims to be useful in helping individuals to find and then hold onto their own composure. This composure is then not a front or a mask or a psychological defense-mechanism. It is an expression of their true self that will be of benefit to them in forming an encounter with another person. Lastly, when they do speak, the breath aware social worker knows that what they say is not usually as important as how they say it and how their breathing supports their meaning. Their voice is not harsh.

Lande (2007) claimed that conscious use of the breath contributed significantly to the formation of the body of the soldier, their posture,



demeanor and their ability to use their voice. In a similar way the conscious cultivation of the awareness of breath and breathing can contribute to the formation of the body of the social worker. The result, of course, is a very different posture, demeanor and tone of voice, one which is based, to re - quote Levin for a final time “not on a will to power” but on “gelassenheit” or composure (Levin, 1984, p129). In addition to the ability to gather their own composure, the breath aware social worker will also have of an awareness of the meaning of the meeting of breath between people, the so called “circle of breath” (Elberfeld, 2018). This can be understood in spiritual terms as a counter to a more individualized sense of self and the spirit. Stillness in social work may be both relational and spiritual

## **Appendix 1**

### **Practicing Mindfulness of Breathing**

“There are two major ways of practicing mindfulness of breathing. One involves the formal discipline of making a specific time in which you stop all activity, assume a special posture, and dwell for some time in moment to moment awareness of the in breath and the outbreath... The second way of practicing using the breath is to be mindful of it from time to time during the day, or even all day long. In this way the thread of meditative awareness, including the physical relation, the emotional call. and the insight that come with it, is woven into every aspect of your daily life....

#### **Exercise 1**

1. Assume a comfortable posture lying on your back or sitting. If you are sitting, as best you can sit in a posture that embodies dignity, keeping the spine straight and letting your shoulders drop.
2. Allow your eyes to close, if it feels comfortable to you.

3. Allow your attention to alight gently on your belly...Feel your belly rise or expand gently on the inbreath, and fall or recede on the outbreath.
4. As best you can, maintain the focus on the various sensations associated with breathing, being with each inbreath for its full duration and being with each outbreath...
5. Every time you notice that your mind has wandered off the breath, notice what it was that carried you away, and then gently bring your attention back to your belly...
6. If your mind wanders away from the breath a thousand times, then your "job" is simply to notice what is on your mind at the moment that you come to realise it is no longer on the breathing, and then bring your attention back to the breath each and every time...
7. Practice this exercise for 15 minutes at a convenient time every day... for one week and see how it feels to incorporate a disciplined meditation practice in your life...

## Exercise 2

1. Tune into your breathing at different times of the day, feeling the belly go through one or two risings and fallings.
2. Become aware of your thoughts and emotions in these moments, just observe them with kindness, without judging them or yourself.
3. At the same time, be aware of any changes in the way you are seeing things and feeling things yourself.
4. Ask yourself and look deeply into whether your awareness of an emotion or thought that arises is actually caught in the feeling of the emotion or in the content of the thought.

(Kabat-Zinn, 2013, pp. 51-53)

## Appendix 2

### The Whispered Ah

"The whispered ah takes pride of place amongst the procedures developed by Alexander... Asked what he considered the essential way for a sedentary worker to keep in condition, F.M. said without hesitation 'The whispered ah'...particularly over a chair'...Because of the difficulties the whispered ah presents to a beginner, however, it is easier first to learn it lying down, in the semi-supine condition (on your back, knees bent, feet down)...

1, Inhibit your desire to do the right thing. Think up along the spine, carry on watching, listening, breathing,

2. While thinking up along the spine, smile or grimace, thereby exposing the upper teeth... the upper lip should move independently of the other facial muscles and above all independently of the neck...

3. While thinking up and smiling, move your lower jaw forwards- in other words, place your lower teeth slightly in front of the upper ones, rather than behind them (where they are normally placed.) ...

4. While thinking up and smiling, and without letting your lower jaw recede, open your mouth....

5. While thinking up and smiling, and without letting your jaw recede and your mouth close, exhale on a nearly silent, whispered ah vowel...Do not try to control your breath and it will be perfectly controlled!

6. After having exhaled, and while still thinking up, close your mouth without contracting the jaw or snapping the teeth, relax your upper lip, and breathe in through your nose. The cycle of the whispered ah is complete."

(De Alcantara, 1997, pp145-146)

### **Appendix 3**

#### **Bumblebee Breathing**

"Yoga texts explain that this exercise frees your mind from inner chatter and the urge to gossip, prepares you to discover your true voice and equips you to speak in a more measured way...

Start by choosing a comfortable sitting position.

1. Sit with your back straight, then make sure your abdomen and chest are unobstructed and free from tension. Rest the palms of your hands on their respective knees.
2. Gently close your mouth and lips, then tighten the back of your throat. Try to remember to keep your head erect and your neck muscles relaxed.
3. Inhale strongly through both nostrils, vibrating your soft palate and making a snoring sound that energises your throat. Some people liken this sound to when you are clearing your throat. Yoga texts compare it to the buzzing of a large black bumblebee, or a male bee.
4. Hold your breath for a few moments – for as long as you feel comfortable doing so...

5. When you are ready, exhale through both nostrils, making a high pitched hummin sound, 'MMM'. Ancient yoga texts compare this sound to the buzzing of a small honey bee – or a female bee. Try to exhale all the air from your lungs.
6. Repeat the exercise 3-5 times, feeling the vibration of your throat, mouth, cheeks and lips. You might like to experiment at different pitches to see how they affect your energy.
7. After you have finished close your eyes and breathe silently. Sit quietly for 3-10 minutes, noticing the effect the humming has had on your mind.”  
( Swami Sarandanada, 2016, p. 138-139)

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